

NOMENCLATORIAL CHANGE FOR A LONG-KNOWN  
SOUTH AFRICAN FISH

By

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(With 1 plate)

More than sketchy knowledge of the shore fishes of southern Africa came only long after that of most other parts. This was a result of various unusual circumstances, stormy seas, poor harbours and hostile natives, all of which retarded European settlement, so that long after early voyagers and travellers had gained fairly extensive knowledge of the fishes of parts as remote as Australia, Cape fishes remained poorly known. While certain early travellers and collectors visited the Cape, more active and able exponents operated in the Mauritius and Madagascar area, with the result that many species from there were described and named in quite early times. As it has been found that many fishes of the Indo-Pacific cover vast areas, one result has been that certain species named as new in the Pacific I have since found to have been described before from Mauritius and other near-by parts of the western Indian Ocean.

Family **Pomadasyidae**

A well-known South African fish whose habits and nature have proved most interesting from many aspects (Smith, 1935, p. 201; 1950) is the so-called Spotted Grunter, long known as *Pomadasy operculare* Playfair, 1866, the type from Zanzibar. This fish is widely distributed in the Indian Ocean, being common about India and Madagascar, where all available evidence indicates clearly that in both countries it has been caught by and was well known to the natives from quite early times. In Madagascar it is one of the best-known inshore fishes (I have photographs of catches by native fishermen there) and as it is not only of striking appearance but an excellent table fish, it seemed likely that it must have been noticed by earlier travellers and collectors in the Mauritius-Madagascar area. I therefore set out to see if it had not been

described before Playfair, and soon discovered that it had. There is no doubt that Playfair's name must yield by priority to *commersonni* Lacépède, 1802, the type from Madagascar, collected and described by Commerson in the previous century. Lacépède (1802a, p. 431), on a drawing by Commerson of a fish from Madagascar, describes as follows (names as in original, description translated): 'Le LABRE COMMERSONNIEN (*Labrus commersonnii*). Nine sharp rays and 16 articulated rays in dorsal fin. Teeth in both jaws about equal. One sharp ray and 17 articulated rays in anal. The back and a great part of the sides of the fish sprinkled with equal round small spots.' Then Lacépède (1802a, in pl. 23, fig. 1, LABRE commersonnien) shows D IX 15, and anal with one spine and about 16 rays, pelvics with at least 7 soft rays, and deeply lunate caudal. Lacépède's artist Desève was often impressionistic and inaccurate by present standards, but the drawing could have been based on the species now under review.

Lacépède (1802b, p. 181, no. 26) also describes LUTJAN MICROSTOME (*Lutjanus microstomus*), also on a drawing by Commerson of a Madagascar fish, as follows: 'Nine spines and 16 articulated rays in the dorsal: the anal sickle-shaped; the head conical and long: the opening of the mouth small: a denticulation (serration) near the nape: the pectoral narrow: a great number of dark spots, irregular and small, on the body and tail.' Also Lacépède (1802a, pl. 34, fig. 2) shows LUTJAN MICROSTOME with D IX 16, anal total about 16, and a serrated preopercle margin; the body with small spots, and unmistakably the species here under review. Lacépède (1802b, p. 216) states: 'Nobody has yet published the description of (LUTJAN) *microstome*, a drawing of which we have seen among the manuscripts of Commerson, and which lives in the great Equinoxial Ocean or in parts of the Great Ocean near the tropics. The teeth of *microstome* are small and slender and the anus is nearer the head than the tail.'

Cuvier & Valenciennes (1830, p. 252) describe 'Le PRISTIPOME COMMERSONNIEN (*Pristipoma Commersonii*, nob.; *Labre Commersonien* et *Lutjan microstome*, Lacép.)' as follows (names as in original, description translated):

'Among the papers of Commerson is a drawing which has been shown twice in the work of M. de Lacépède, the first time (vol. III, pl. 23, fig. 1) with the name *Labre Commersonien* (pp. 431 and 477)' (to which Cuvier & Valenciennes give the footnote: 'The characters of *Labre Commersonien* ([Lacépède] p. 431) and notably the 17 rays in the anal, are taken from the figure ([Lacépède] pl. 23) which has been distorted by [the artist] Desève. '); 'the second time (vol. III, pl. 34, fig. 2) with the name *Lutjan microstome* (vol. IV, pp. 181 and 216)' (to which Cuvier & Valenciennes give the footnote: 'The characters of *Labre microstome* ([Lacépède] p. 181) are taken from the other copy, also made by Desève, and conform better with the original, but again he distorts the anal.'). '. . . It [is a fish that] was found, says the traveller [Commerson], in the mouth of small rivers in the south of Madagascar. The specimen described weighs about 5-6 ounces, and is about 8-9 inches long, but it grows

larger and reaches about 2 pounds in weight. The colour is a blue silvery white, covered with brown-black spots. The dorsal, anal and caudal are brownish, the other fins whitish or transparent. The teeth are very small, like a file. The margin of the preopercle is denticulate, no marked spine on opercle. The dorsal is deeply cleft. The pectorals are long and pointed. The first anal spine is very short, the second abruptly longer, very strong, the third much less. The caudal is forked. B. 7; D. 10/16; A. 3/9; p. 17; V. 1/5.'

In view of this unmistakable designation of the species, it is plainly the fish that has been known all this time under the name of *P. operculare* Plyfr.

It is curious that Lacépède's name has not before been revived. That this has not been done appears to be due chiefly to Günther, who in 1859 (p. 289) synonymized *commersonni* Lacépède, 1802, *microstoma* Lacépède, 1802 and *commersoni* as described by Cuvier & Valenciennes (1830, p. 252) all with *hasta* Bloch, 1790. Günther's commanding position caused this opinion to be accepted, uncritically, by all later workers on the Indian Ocean fauna. The following table shows the difference between *hasta* Bloch and *operculare* Playfair, and the correspondence of the latter with *commersonni* Lacépède.

	<i>hasta</i>	<i>operculare</i>	<i>commersonni</i>
Dorsal	D XII-XIII 13-15	D X (-XI) 13-16	X 16
Anal	A III 6-7	A III 8-10	III 9
Gillrakers	12-13	15-17	—
Markings	Interrupted crossbars	Many small dark spots	Many small dark spot

In order to make quite certain I wrote to the Natural History Museum in Paris to ask if they had Commerson's Madagascar specimen. Dr. M. Bauchot replied to say that the specimen (like most of Commerson's fishes) cannot be found, and that Commerson's original drawing is apparently lost, but on going through Cuvier's papers there was found a copy by Cuvier's artist of Commerson's original 1768 drawing with notes copied from Commerson's manuscript; of this they kindly sent me a photograph (shown here). Also pinned to the drawing was a copy of Lacépède's illustration. This figure leaves no doubt about the identity of Commerson's fish from Madagascar, and the name *Pomadasys operculare* Playfair, 1866 used for close on a century must yield by priority to *Pomadasys commersonni* Lacépède, 1802.\* A photograph of a specimen from the Transkei of *Pomadasys commersonni* of size comparable with Commerson's fish is shown here (pl. XV).

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\* The original spelling with double "n" by Lacépède is used here.

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